

A CLOSERLOOK

BY Y O S S I K R A U S Z

NATIONAL & WORLD NEWS

MAHMOUD ABBAS MAKES HIS ENDGAME MOVES

The Palestinian leader
sets up his successor.
But will he succeed?



Palestinian supporters of Fatah march in support of the joint conference between Hamas and Fatah in Ramallah

“It seems that President Abbas has made up his mind.”

—An anonymous Palestinian official, speaking with The Jerusalem Post about recent appointments to the PLO leadership



s rare as a Palestinian election.”

If that’s not a phrase yet, it should be. The last time there was an election for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority was in 2005.

And the last time there was an election for its parliament was in 2006, which ended miserably, with a Hamas win. That’s one major reason why President Mahmoud Abbas, who governs the PA in the West Bank, hasn’t held elections since then, despite a couple of false starts: They’re unlikely to end well.

Then there’s the other reason: He likes holding onto power.

But Abbas is getting old. At 86, it’s unlikely he’ll be in power for much longer. The question of who will replace him is getting more and more urgent.

Last week, Abbas made a move that seemed to clarify what he wants to happen after he is gone. At a two-day meeting of the PLO’s Central Committee, several of Abbas’ closest allies were elevated to top positions. Observers said that the filling of a seat on the PLO Executive Committee by Hussein al-Sheikh, a close adviser to Abbas, seemed in line with suggestions that Abbas wants him to take over after Abbas’ departure.

That wouldn’t be bad for Israel, as it has a good relationship with al-Sheikh. But it also means that the Palestinian groups that boycotted the meeting aren’t going to be happy.

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Chosen for the next step

Who is Hussein al-Sheikh?

Hussein al-Sheikh has been a longtime player in PA politics. In the late '70s and '80s, al-Sheikh spent 11 years in an Israeli prison, where he learned Hebrew. He then joined the Palestinian leadership during the First Intifada. After the Oslo Accords, he spent some time in the PA security forces.

Since 2007, he has served as the head of the PA's General Authority of Civil Affairs. But in recent years, he has also become a major spokesman for the PA around the world, often supplanting the official



foreign minister and spokesmen.

He has also gained a reputation for a good relationship with Israel.

His nomination for a position on the PLO Executive Committee by the Fatah Central Committee wasn't much of a

surprise, as he has been a favorite of Mahmoud Abbas in recent years. And al-Sheikh's seat on the council will be the one that previously belonged to Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian negotiator who served as a kind of unofficial Palestinian spokesman before

al-Sheikh.

Hamas and the PFLP boycotted the meeting at which al-Sheikh was nominated and attempted to hold a protest (which didn't materialize). Their demand is for elections, something that al-Sheikh's nomination may be intended to circumvent.

Abbas is no huge friend of Israel, saying last week that he would cut off security assistance with Israel because of the killing of three Fatah members Israel said had been involved in shooting at Israeli soldiers over the past month. Abbas continues to make other threatening comments and statements, as usual.

But he has kept the West Bank relatively quiet and Palestinian attacks on Israelis fewer in number than they might be. What will happen when Abbas leaves the scene and a successor must be chosen? Will the West Bank turn chaotic, with open civil war? Will anyone be strong enough to keep the level of control that exists today (which still involves plenty of violence and threats toward Israelis)? Or will the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority fracture in a way that causes even worse trouble for Israel?

In order to understand, we spoke with several experts on Palestinian politics and the security situation.

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Professor Efraim Inbar, President of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security

How will this work out for Abbas?

As we know, his level of public approval is very low, and Hamas is gaining more support in the Palestinian territories.

This past week there was an Israeli operation that killed three terrorists who were part of the PA's security forces. Abbas came out against Israel [in an attempt to regain support].

We all know that the PA is corrupt and inefficient and the Palestinians are in trouble. As a result of that, the Israelis are too.

Does he have enough control to

maintain this at the moment?

I don't think he has ever been fully in control. When people talk about security cooperation between Israel and the PA, part of that involved hunting down Hamas members [who are Abbas' opponents]. He was basically maintaining his existence through Israeli bayonets. We helped him rule.

He is losing control in parts of the Palestinian territories, like Jenin and Chevron and in the Palestinian refugee camps.

Is there something else that Israel would like to see instead? What better outcome would they rather have?

Not really. It's not like the situation with Jordan or Egypt. We made a deal with them, territory for no terrorism, and they were successful in keeping the deal. The same deal was made with the PA. People are mistaken when they think that Rabin was naïve. Basically, the agreement was that they would get territories and keep terrorists away from us, and could do in those territories whatever they wanted: without human rights organizations, without a Supreme Court, and with Arab methods. We aren't democratic crusaders

The agreement was that they would get territories and keep terrorists away from us, and could do in those territories whatever they wanted.

like the Americans.

But now it's a problem.

Is there anything people should be watching for?

First, Abbas' health. As long as he is able to be seen in public as functional, there is a better chance for his regime to survive. I think we may see something like what happened towards the end of the Soviet Union, when even if the leaders were sick they were kept like mummies. The same thing will probably happen to Abu Mazen [Abbas].

This is an area that is ruled by the people who have the guns.

Do you think it will be total chaos when he dies?

There is a clear possibility of a civil war. At the same time, there are people who realize that having a state is good business. Maybe they will work together to keep the façade of having one.

Is there any other aspect you think is important?

I think Israel should keep away. Our ability to do political engineering to ensure that things go the way we want is very limited. We shouldn't ally ourselves, at least publicly, with any factions. And we need to lower our expectations.

Even Gaza isn't ruled by a single faction. Islamic Jihad has a militia, Hamas has a militia, and there are clans with weapons. Such is the Palestinian landscape. There is no monopoly over the use of force in this political entity. They may get a lot of money from the naïve Europeans, but it's not a European model.



Palestinian security forces stand guard outside the Legislative Council building in Gaza City



Russian President Vladimir Putin with Mahmoud Abbas

The day after he dies there will be a lot of problems in the national camp because of the competition between Fatah and Hamas.



Yohanan Tzoreff, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies

How will this work out for Abbas?

I think it's a very fragile situation. His own movement, Fatah, is very divided. He does not have full support. The day after he dies there will be a lot of problems in the national camp because of the competition between Fatah and Hamas.

The public is also against him, with more than 75% wanting him to resign. That's why he decided to take some steps to guarantee Fatah a better position after

he is gone. He chose al-Sheikh as one of the people who will be in a position of leadership, and in the last few months he has also elevated Majed Faraj [head of the Palestinian General Intelligence Service], who has no new position but now has responsibility for all of the security services.

We are talking about an attempt by Abu Mazen to ensure that his policies will continue, as well as an attempt to make sure that the leaders will think the same way he does.

He's also concerned that his sons may suffer after he's gone because they're corrupt. These people—al-Sheikh and Faraj—won't make moves against them.

Do you think there will be chaos after he dies?

Even before he leaves us, we are already seeing a lot of weakness. Israel is one of the main reasons for his weakness, because the Netanyahu government didn't do anything to fix the situation. And the four years of Trump really destroyed Abu Mazen.

I don't think that he can unify the Palestinians, nor do I see anyone who can do that. And that's a problem for all of us. Even the Israeli security system is looking at this with concern.

We need to support Abu Mazen and his policies because there is no alternative.

And the Americans have to push something forward. Even talking about the political issues is important. I don't know why the American administration isn't doing anything.

The main problems are within the Palestinian society, and we need to help them.

Is there anything else you think people don't understand about the situation?

People are tired of the dispute, and this feeling gives legitimacy to ignoring the problems. We can't ignore the problems anymore. But most Israelis are still standing in the middle and won't give support to the government to do anything.

The Americans also have to do something. Something has to be done.



Freed Palestinian prisoners flash "V" for victory. The release was a goodwill gesture by Israel to PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

Hussein al-Sheikh is an inside man. He's not from the diaspora. Abbas knows that he needs an inside man.



**Prof. Hillel Frisch,
Professor Emeritus
at Bar-Ilan University
and Former Senior
Researcher at the
Begin-Sadat Center for
Strategic Studies**

Will Abbas be successful in maintaining power?

As long as he is able to. He's 86 years old, but he's firmly in power and entrenched. The bureaucracy and the security forces support him. Externally,

basically everyone—the Americans, the Europeans and the Jordanians—prefers him to anyone else at the present moment.

When he dies, will there be chaos?

To me, it seems very clear who his successor will be, especially from the Israeli point of view. It's going to be a team. The politician is Hussein al-Sheikh, and the security man is Majed Faraj. They work together, and they are the only potential candidates who have this kind of alliance. And it's a very special kind of alliance.

Hussein al-Sheikh has other virtues from Abbas' point of view. He's an inside man. He's not from the diaspora. Abbas knows that he needs an inside man.

Yet another virtue is that Hussein al-Sheikh has status as someone who was in an Israeli prison.

A fourth advantage, from Abbas' point of view, is that these two people are the most favored by the Israelis and are hated by Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

There is also a question of age. Al-

Sheikh is 60, so he's much younger than the other viable candidate, Mahmoud Aloul, who is 72. Aloul is also an outsider. He is much more radical and the Israelis hate him. Then there's Jibril Rajoub, but he has become radicalized over the last 20 years and is now basically an outsider.

I think the Israeli diplomatic and military establishment will do everything to help them maintain order.

Faraj also worked with the Americans to reform the security system, so he has good connections in Washington.

I don't think chaos is a foregone conclusion. Israel is sufficiently powerful in Judea and Samaria to help them.

Is there any event people should be watching out for?

Only G-d knows how healthy a person will be. I think Americans are reminded of that when they look at Biden, and Abbas is seven years older than him.

But it's interesting that Abu Mazen is finally grooming a successor for the first time. ●